

Ski Hill Road: the Central Kenai's favorite hiking trail

by Rick Johnston

If you live or work on the central Kenai, you may well have a favorite walking or hiking place on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For many, it's a remote and solitary informal route in the hills and for others it's a well-maintained designated trail within one of the Refuge's wilderness areas. Others prefer a hike with a harvest goal in mind, such as the infamous Russian River confluence or its upstream reach. It may come as a surprise to some, but not to Soldotna locals or Refuge employees, that by far, Ski Hill Road is the most popular hiking route on the Refuge.

Braving roadside parking, slippery road conditions, dust, teenage speedsters, and big trucks we see the dog walkers, joggers, skiers, hikers, noon-time exercise enthusiasts, seniors, bicyclers, mothers with back-packed-babies in tow, 40-year-locals, tourists, high school track teams, and speed walkers. Originally the "secret" walking route of long-time residents like Marge and Peggy Mullin, Ski Hill Road has developed somewhat of a local cult following. Not to be outsmarted, first-time users can be seen weekly alongside veteran Ski Hill Roaders.

The attraction seems to be a "good surface in a great setting!" Year round walking/jogging near town through a pleasant forested setting with challenging grade and good footing is nothing to take lightly. With the Soldotna area encircled by deep snow in the winter and soggy marsh in the summer, nearby hiking opportunities like Ski Hill are worth their weight in expensive jogging shoes. Some people park alongside the road, others at Skyview High or at the Refuge headquarters. Still others jog or walk from home in Soldotna and top off a three-mile roundtrip with several additional miles on Refuge headquarters trails. Fitness/pain addicts love the long uphill climb from Soldotna and only wish it was slightly longer and steeper.

For background, Ski Hill road is located just south of the Soldotna city limits, looping south from Funny River Road by Spenard Building Supply to a point approximately 1.5 miles along the Sterling Highway, directly across from Skyview High School. It was part of the original Sterling Highway from Anchorage to Homer, constructed in 1949. Like other original cross-Peninsula highway routes through the Kenai National

Wildlife Refuge, such as Skilak Lake Road, Ski Hill Road has become a secondary recreational side loop, paralleling the newer straightened Sterling Highway.

Ski Hill Road gets its name from a long-gone ropetow and ski hill that was constructed in the 1960s. It was operated on Moose Range land under a special use permit issued to a local winter sports club. The ropetow ski area was a popular local venue for a short time in the early days of Soldotna. Later, a small network of cross-country ski trails was cleared, near the Highway Department's communications tower. The ski trailhead has been relocated, and the ski trails have been extended.

In 1979 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service planners moved the Kenai National Moose Range Headquarter from Old Town Kenai to Ski Hill Road, utilizing government land close to town on a good road, with electric power, and float plane access. Over the years a variety of amenities were developed, such as a wildlife viewing area, a new nature trail, expanded Nordic ski trails, and the construction of the Refuge Visitors Center. A general population increase and the opening of Skyview High School in 1990 further added to the vehicle use of Ski Hill Road.

Almost every local driver and every Refuge employee has a horror story of nearly missing a walker, or slipping sideways in their vehicle on glare ice in the general direction of pedestrians in the road way. Conversely, almost every regular hiker has had to take evasive action from approaching vehicles not necessarily under control. A narrow and winding gravel roadbed with no real shoulders or sidewalks, and a steep grade all conspire to make Ski Hill Road seem awfully narrow when a descending driver faces an entire cross-country sports team on a jog, spread over the roadway.

Annually, numerous vehicles go in the ditch along the road due to loose gravel and/or ice and perhaps excessive speed. Some say it's a clear miracle that a pedestrian or multiple pedestrians have not been hit. Many inexperienced teen drivers have made their first "uh-oh" cellular call to dad from a Ski Hill Road ditch. And it is not uncommon that the first on scene person to render assistance is a walker or jogger.

Ski Hill Road remains a state highway right-of-

way although most maintenance, such as snow removal and sanding, is done by Refuge staff.

Starting with the anticipation of Skyview High School's opening in 1990, various proposals to increase safety by separating pedestrians and vehicles have been formally and informally discussed. Proposals have included blocking off one entrance to decrease traffic, blocking off about half of the existing road and making it a trail; converting the entire length to a trail and establishing a new Refuge entrance road straight in from the Sterling Highway, and establishing a parallel all-weather trail to physically separate vehicles and pedestrians.

State and Refuge officials are aware of the popularity of Ski Hill Road and of the need to enhance safety, and both have generally been supportive of some type of change in the through traffic situation.

Until the daily mix of pedestrians and vehicles can be remedied, drivers and walkers should be very aware of each other, and walk and drive defensively. Visitors to the Refuge either on foot, or by vehicle are always welcome. Sometimes, what attracts visitors to

the Refuge and what planners/managers think attracts visitors can be two different visions. With the abundance of trail opportunities, who would ever think a dusty old road would be so popular, but it is, and Refuge management is listening and determined in the long run to make Ski Hill Road safer.

Refuge users who have ideas for Ski Hill Road are encouraged to share their thoughts with Refuge staff or State Department of Transportation folks. Refuge managers and the public participants in the current Kenai NWR Comprehensive Planning Process will also have opportunities to discuss Ski Hill Road and other Refuge outdoor recreation opportunities.

If you would like more information concerning Ski Hill Road, Refuge hiking, right-of-ways, or access, or how to get involved in Kenai Refuge planning contact Refuge headquarters at 262-7886.

Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.